



Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

by

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Seeing All Things in God

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

The Upanishads

The sacred scriptures of India are vast. Their importance is ranked differently according to the particular viewpoint of the individual. In Hinduism there are six *darshanas*, or systems of philosophy. They often seem to contradict themselves (and their professed adherents usually *do* contradict those of the other darshanas), but the wise know that they are only different ways of seeing the same thing, and it is that One Thing which makes them both valid and ultimately harmonious. That unifying subject is Brahman: God the Absolute, beyond and besides Whom there is no “other” whatsoever. Yet, according to differences in outlook, there is difference in evaluation of the scriptures. However, all followers of the Eternal (Sanatana) Dharma agree that the Vedas are the supreme authority, and the Vedas are always understood to include those treatises of mystical and speculative philosophy known as the Upanishads. The word “upanishad” comes from the root word *upāsana*, which means “to draw near,” and is usually considered to mean that which was heard when the student sat near the teacher to learn the eternal truths.

We do not know who wrote (or relayed from inner perception) the Vedas or the Upanishads, though we do have the names of those considered the original seers of the Vedic knowledge, though we know virtually nothing about their lives. This has a distinct advantage over the scriptures of other religions, for then the image of a historical, finite personality does not intervene to obscure the revelation they handed on to their students. It is in no way unjust to say that in other religions concentration on, adulation, and worship of the person who gave the revelation has often obscured and even abrogated their purpose in giving the teachings. Words and behavior diametrically opposed to the Messenger’s teachings are sanctified by “devotion,” “love,” and “dedication” to “the Master,” “the Lord,” or “the Savior” who has a heaven to which he will welcome all faithful and believing devotees. “Following” is the ideal rather than *becoming* what the Teacher was. Lost in the personality of the Messenger, they forget the Message. “Adore the Messenger and ignore the Message” becomes the norm.

The authority of the Vedic scriptures rests not upon those who wrote them down but upon the *demonstrable truths* they express. They are as self-sufficient and self-evident as the multiplication tables or the Table of Elements. They are simply the complete and unobscured truth. And realization of that Truth alone matters.

The first Upanishad we will look into is the Isha Upanishad, so called from its opening word: *ishavasyam*.

Translation

The Upanishads have long interested students of philosophy in the West. The English philosopher Hume translated some of them into English in the eighteenth century. Later he travelled to America where he taught Sanskrit to Thomas Jefferson and together they studied the Upanishads in their original form.

The greatest boon seekers of truth in this country have received are the translations of

the Upanishads¹ and the Bhagavad Gita² made by Swami Prabhavananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California in the nineteen-forties. I was privileged to hear him speak in 1962, and the value and clarity of his insights were remarkable. In his translations he did not attempt an exact literalism, yet they convey the meanings of the texts far better than most who try for literal wording. Reading his translation of the Gita changed my life in 1960, and everything which happened afterward was a consequence of that. My debt to him is incalculable and therefore unpayable. I looked at many translations before taking up the task of commenting on the Upanishads, and I found Swamiji's version inescapable. The Light of the Self (Atma Jyoti) radiates from the pages, conveying to us the illumination and blessing of his teacher Swami Brahmananda and *his* Master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, of Whom it can be rightly said: "He shining, everything shines."

An instructive story

Just before going to India for the first time in 1962, I had the great good fortune to meet and hear Sri A. B. Purani, the administrator of the renowned Aurobindo Ashram of Pondicherry, India. From his lips I heard the most brilliant expositions of Vedic philosophy; nothing in my subsequent experience has equaled them. In one talk he told the following story:

In ancient India there lived a most virtuous Brahmin who was considered by all to be the best authority on philosophy. One day the local king ordered him to appear before him. When he did so, the king said: "I have three questions that puzzle—even torment—me: Where is God? Why don't I see Him? And what does he do all day? If you can't answer these three questions I will have your head cut off." The Brahmin was appalled and terrified, because the answers to these questions were not just complex, they were impossible to formulate. In other words: he did not know the answers. So his execution date was set.

On the morning of that day the Brahmin's teenage son appeared and asked the king if he would release his father if he—the son—would answer the questions. The king agreed, and the son asked that a container of milk be brought to him. It was done. Then the boy asked that the milk be churned into butter. That, too, was done.

"The first two of your questions are now answered," he told the king.

The king objected that he had been given no answers, so the son asked: "Where was the butter before it was churned?"

"In the milk," replied the king.

"In what part of the milk?" asked the boy.

"In all of it."

"Just so, agreed the boy, "and in the same way God is within all things and pervades all things."

"Why don't I see Him, then," pressed the king.

"Because you do not 'churn' your mind and refine your perceptions through meditation. If you do that, you will see God. But not otherwise. Now let my father go."

"Not at all," insisted the king. "You have not told me what God does all day."

"To answer that," said the boy, "we will have to change places. You come stand here and let me sit on the throne."

The request was so audacious the king complied, and in a moment he was standing before

¹ *The Upanishads, Breath of the Eternal.* Vedanta Press.

² *The Song of God, Bhagavad Gita.* Vedanta Press.

the enthroned Brahmin boy who told him: “This is the answer. One moment you were here and I was there. Now things are reversed. God perpetually lifts up and casts down every one of us.”³ In one life we are exalted and in another we are brought low—oftentimes in a single life this occurs, and even more than once. Our lives are completely in His hand, and He does with us as He wills.”

The Brahmin was released and his son was given many honors and gifts by the king.

The Isha Upanishad opens with the answer to the question as to God’s “whereabouts.”

He is within all

“In the heart of all things, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord.”⁴ Whatever we experience, whether through the inner or outer senses, it is a covering of the Lord (Isha). Since it conceals, it necessarily blinds, confuses, or inhibits us. It is a door closed in our face. Tragically, throughout lives without number we have not known this simple fact and have as a consequence believed that the experienced, whether objective or subjective, is the sole reality and have dissipated life after life in involvement with it to our pain and destruction. A door is never the way out: the way out is revealed when the door is moved aside—eliminated. Not knowing this, either, we have clawed, hammered, and hewn at the door—at least in those lives when we were not adulating and worshipping it or calling it “God’s greatest gift to us”—to no avail. The root problem is our believing in the door’s reality, thinking that it is the beginning, middle, and end. Only when it disappears will we see the truth that lies beyond “things.”

We must not just get “inside” things, we must get to their heart. And how is that done? *By getting into our own heart*, into the core of our own being. There everything will be found. The key to the door is meditation.

Another viewing

Prabhavananda has conveyed the ultimate message of these opening words of the Isha Upanishad. The literal translation, however, gives us another view which we should consider: “All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—should be covered by the Lord.”⁵ Rather than speaking of piercing to the heart of things, the literal meaning is that the Lord should be seen covering—that is, enveloping—all things. This has two meanings.

1) What I have just expressed, that we should experience—not just think intellectually—that God is encompassing all things, that we should not see things as independent or separate from God, but as existing within God. And this vision should extend to us: we, too, exist only within Him.

2) In our seeing of things, God should always be between us and them. First we should see God, and only secondarily see the “things.”

The renowned Swami (Papa) Ramdas in his spiritual autobiography *In Quest of God* writes of his initial spiritual awakening in these words: “It was at this time that it slowly dawned upon his mind that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false....All thought, all mind, all heart, all soul was concentrated on Ram, Ram covering up and absorbing everything.”

In the Bhagavad Gita, considered to convey the essence of the Upanishadic wisdom, both Prabhavananda’s and the literal translations are put together when Krishna tells Arjuna that

³ “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree” (Luke 1:52).

⁴ Isha Upanishad 1

⁵ Translation by Swami Nikhilananda.

the wise see God in all things and all things in God.⁶

He IS all

If we accept the foregoing, then we will take the next step and experience that “He alone is the reality.”⁷ This can be understood more than one way. We can conclude that God alone is real and everything else is unreal. The problem with that is our tendency to equate “unreal” with non-existent, and wrongly belief that everything is only an illusion, that it has no reality whatsoever. The great non-dual philosopher Shankara explained the accurate view by likening our experience of things to that of a man who sees a rope in dim light and mistakes it for a snake, his mind even supplying eyes that glitter and a mouth that hisses at him. When light is brought, he sees that there is no snake, only a rope. The snake was not real, but his impression, however mistaken, was real. The snake was not real, it was non-existent; but the impression of the snake was real and did exist. The rope was the reality and the snake was an illusion overlain on it. In the same way God is the reality and everything else is illusory like the snake. But illusion does exist. Denying it gets us nowhere; we have to deal with it by seeing through it, by dispelling it. Then we will see the reality: God. After that we can progress to the understanding that even though our interpretation may be wrong, what we perceive does have a real side to it, and that is God Himself. Hence, all things are God in their real side. The “wrong” side is in our mind alone. We can say that God is the reality of the unreal, which we need to see past. And that is the whole idea of the opening verse of the upanishad. He alone is real; He is all things.

Be at peace

“Wherefore, renouncing vain appearances, rejoice in him.”⁸ All of our sorrows and troubles come from our mistaking vain appearances for reality, from our looking at them with our outer eyes instead of beholding God with the inner eye. But we are addicted to those vain appearances—we have to admit that. Yes, we are even addicted to all the pain and anxiety they bring us. That is foolish, but is it any more foolish than it is to be addicted to drugs or alcohol—or to people that harm us? We are insane on certain levels; this world is a madhouse for people of our particular lunacy. The sooner we understand this and resolve to be cured and released, the better things will be for us. For from “things” we will move on to God-perception.

For this reason the yogis, those who seek God in meditation, should be the most cheerful and optimistic of people. If we look to God we will see only perfection and rejoice in it; if we look at ourselves, others, and the world around us we will see only imperfection and be discontent. Depression comes from looking in the wrong place. It is the bitter fruit of ego-involvement, of ego-obsession. The remedy is not to have “high self-esteem” but rather to have God-esteem. And since we live in God, we will see the divine side even of ourselves and be ever hopeful. Once God spoke to a contemporary mystic and said: “I am He Who Is. You are She Who Is Not.” Now to the ego that may sound hateful, but to the questing spirit it is a liberating assurance. The unreal which we call “me” need not be struggled with: it is only a ghost, a shadow. Bringing in the light of God-contact will reveal that to be the truth. Then we

⁶ “Those who see Me in everything and see everything in Me, are not separated from Me and I am not separated from them” (6:30). This is the translation of Ramanand Prasad.

⁷ Isha Upanishad 1

⁸ Isha Upanishad 1

will be at peace and in perfect joy. What a burden is lifted from those who come to know that God alone is real and true, and that we need only look to Him. When we look within we find Him as the heart of our selves.

We must renounce unreality. As I say, we are addicted to it, so we will have to struggle to break the terrible habit of delusion, just as those addicted to the hallucinations produced by drugs have to break away from them and discard them forever. Then we will “rejoice in Him.”

Desirelessness

“Covet no man’s wealth.” Why? Because it does not exist! It is just a bubble destined to burst leaving nothing in its place. There are no “things” to covet or possess. They are the fever dreams of illusion from which we must awaken. No one really owns anything—firstly because the thing (as we perceive it) does not exist, and the “man” does not exist either; and neither do we—as least so far as our perceptions of “them,” “it,” and “me” go.

God and I in space alone
And nobody else in view.
“And where are the people, O Lord!” I said.
“The earth below and the sky o’erhead
And the dead whom once I knew?”

“That was a dream,” God smiled and said,
“A dream that seemed to be true,
There were no people, living or dead,
There was no earth and no sky o’erhead
There was only Myself—and you.”

“Why do I feel no fear,” I asked,
“Meeting you here in this way,
For I have sinned I know full well,
And there is heaven and there is hell,
And is this the judgment day?”

“Nay, those were dreams,” the great God said,
“Dreams that have ceased to be.
There are no such things as fear or sin,
There is no you—you have never been—
There is nothing at all but Me.”⁹

Living a Life Worth Living **Commentary on the Isha Upanishad**

⁹ “Illusion” by Edna Wheeler Wilcox.

How to live

“Well may he be content to live a hundred years who acts without attachment who works his work with earnestness, but without desire, not yearning for its fruits—he, and he alone.”¹⁰

It is generally felt that this verse—and other passages from scriptures and books on spiritual life—indicates that one hundred years is the normal lifespan for a human being. On the other hand, the figure of one hundred years may also symbolize the complete lifespan of a person, however brief or long, the idea here being that not one moment of our life need be a burden nor should we ever wish to shorten our life by a single breath—that life should be lived in fulfillment with peace and happiness all the way through. That this is possible has been shown well by the saints and Masters of all religions and ages. We need only know how to do it; and these words give the way.

Acting without attachment and desire

In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna draws very clearly for us the picture of a person who lives in anxiety and misery and him who lives in peace and contentment. Both may be living in exactly the same situation, for it is not external conditions that make us happy or miserable, but our reaction to them. Krishna makes it quite plain that the secret of happiness or misery lies in the absence of two things: attachment and desire. Those who live in attachment to externalities, anxious to fulfill desire, must suffer and live in frustration. On the other hand, those who live without egoic desire are perpetually at peace.

Nonattachment

Krishna not only holds out the ideal for us, He also tells us how to accomplish it.

“Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord. Renounce attachment to the fruits. Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is this evenness of temper which is meant by yoga.” (2:48)

“In the calm of self-surrender you can free yourself from the bondage of virtue and vice during this very life. Devote yourself, therefore, to reaching union with Brahman. To unite the heart with Brahman and then to act: that is the secret of non-attached work.” (2:50)

“When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future.” (2:52)

“The world is imprisoned in its own activity, except when actions are performed as worship of God. Therefore you must perform every action sacramentally, and be free from all attachments to results.” (3:9)

“Whosoever works for me alone, makes me his only goal and is devoted to me, free from attachment, and without hatred toward any creature—that man, O Prince, shall enter into me.” (11:55)

“Therefore, a man should contemplate Brahman until he has sharpened the axe of his non-attachment. With this axe, he must cut through the firmly-rooted Aswattha tree.” (15:3)

“No human being can give up action altogether, but he who gives up the fruits of action is said to be non-attached.” (18:11)

“When a man has achieved non-attachment, self-mastery and freedom from desire through renunciation, he reaches union with Brahman, who is beyond all action.” (18:49)

¹⁰ Isha Upanishad 2

In other words, keeping the mind on God frees us from egoic attachment to our activities. This is an extremely high ideal and one very hard to attain; yet we must strive for it through the practice of meditation, for only the clarity of vision reached through meditation can enable us to live out such a lofty ideal.

Working with earnestness

Lest we think that negative or passive indifference is detachment, or that carelessness and shoddiness in our daily work is spiritual-mindedness—a view that prevails in much of the Orient and among many in the West—the Upanishad plainly tells us that the wise man “works his work with earnestness.” This is really a great portion of the Bhagavad Gita’s message: that we must work with skill to the best of our abilities—that is our part—while leaving the results to God—that is His part. In that way we truly are “workers together” with God¹¹ in our life. Sri Ramakrishna said: “If you can weigh salt you can weigh sugar,” meaning that if a person is proficient in spiritual life he will be proficient in his outer life as well. That does not mean that all yogis need to become great successes in business or some other profession, but it does mean that they need to work with the full capabilities they possess and do absolutely the best they can—and no more; that is, they need not worry about the results. In this way they will be at peace both internally and externally.

Without desire

The real cankerworm in the garden of our life is desire, whether in the form of wanting, wishing, yearning, desiring, hoping, demanding, or craving. Whether to a little or a great degree, desire destroys our hearts and our chances for inner peace. Desire is a wasting fever which drives us onward to spiritual loss. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”¹² As Wordsworth wrote: “We have given our hearts away—a sordid boon!” I have spent my entire life watching people gain a little bit of the world and lose their souls. And ultimately they lost the world, too, either in the changes of earthly fortune or through the finality of death.

“And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”¹³

Desirelessness is not a zombie-like passivity, a kind of pious vegetating. Far from it. Krishna lauds the desireless in these words:

He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.

¹¹ II Corinthians 6:1

¹² Mark 8:36

¹³ Luke 12:15-21

Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined. (2:55)

Not shaken by adversity,
Not hankering after happiness:
Free from fear, free from anger,
Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined. (2:56)

The bonds of his flesh are broken.
He is lucky, and does not rejoice:
He is unlucky, and does not weep
I call him illumined. (2:57)

The tortoise can draw in its legs:
The seer can draw in his senses.
I call him illumined. (2:58)

The abstinent run away from what they desire
But carry their desires with them:
When a man enters Reality,
He leaves his desires behind him. (2:59)

The desireless who have fulfilled themselves in God are the most alive, happy, and satisfied of beings. Surely they—and they alone—are “content to live a hundred years.” For them there is no talk of death being a “blessed release” (which it is not), for they are already freed in spirit.

Spiritual Suicides

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

“Worlds there are without suns, covered up with darkness. To these after death go the ignorant, slayers of the Self.”¹⁴ (“Verily, those worlds of the asuras are enveloped in blind darkness; and thereto they all repair after death who are slayers of Atman.” This is the translation of Swami Nikhilananda.)

The Upanishadic seer(s?) opened by speaking of the way of fulfilled and joyful life: seeing the Divine in all things, and living on the earth according to Divine Law. But this is not the only world in which we can find ourself as we move through a cycle of continuous birth and death—birth into one world after having died out of another, or another birth into the world where we were just living. When we speak of “birth” we usually think only of physical embodiment on this earth. But when we die in this world we are born into an astral world where we remain for some time and then die to that world and become born back into this world. Although this world remains virtually the same—despite the fact that every generation thinks it is a great advance over previous eras—we can spend time in a vast array of astral worlds, positive and negative, pleasant and unpleasant. The earth becomes a kind of stable place of return for us. Or is it?

Many births, many worlds

Although the earth accommodates a wide range of spiritual and psychological evolution, the astral worlds are more specialized. There is an astral world for every degree of consciousness. These worlds can be classified just as sentient beings are classified. That does not say much, since each person can have a different set of criteria for such classification. But the masters of wisdom have generally agreed: there are two basic kinds of people—suras and asuras, those who dwell in the light and those who live in the dark. “Divine” and “demonic” are commonly used to translate sura—or deva—and asura. A sura/deva is in the light, an asura is not. Sometimes a person dwells in the dark by choice, but most often it is a state of ignorance rather than negative volition. Because of this we need to avoid a “deva is good, asura is bad” reaction in all cases, though there are instances when this is accurate, and to repress it would be foolish—and asuric!

The sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita

Practically speaking, however—that is, looking at the result of manifesting those natures—it is just that simple. An entire chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is directed to this manner of divine (devic) and demonic (asuric) nature as it manifests in human beings. I know it is pretty lengthy, but it is so insightful and complete that it merits inclusion here. Sri Krishna speaks:

“A man who is born with tendencies toward the Divine, is fearless and pure in heart. He perseveres in that path to union with Brahman which the scriptures and his teacher have taught him. He is charitable. He can control his passions. He studies the scriptures regularly, and obeys their directions. He practices spiritual disciplines. He is straightforward, truthful, and of an even temper. He harms no one. He renounces the things of this world. He has a

¹⁴ Isha Upanishad 3

tranquil mind and an unmalicious tongue. He is compassionate toward all. He is not greedy. He is gentle and modest. He abstains from useless activity. He has faith in the strength of his higher nature. He can forgive and endure. He is clean in thought and act. He is free from hatred and from pride. Such qualities are his birthright.

“When a man is born with demonic tendencies, his birthright is hypocrisy, arrogance, conceit, anger, cruelty and ignorance.

“The birthright of the divine nature leads to liberation. The birthright of the demonic nature leads to greater bondage. But you need not fear, Arjuna: your birthright is divine.

“In this world there are two kinds of beings: those whose nature tends toward the Divine, and those who have the demonic tendencies. I have already described the divine nature to you in some detail. Now you shall learn more about the demonic nature.

“Men of demonic nature know neither what they ought to do, nor what they should refrain from doing. There is no truth in them, or purity, or right conduct. They maintain that the scriptures are a lie, and that the universe is not based upon a moral law, but godless, conceived in lust and created by copulation, without any other cause. Because they believe this in the darkness of their little minds, these degraded creatures do horrible deeds, attempting to destroy the world. They are enemies of mankind.

“Their lust can never be appeased. They are arrogant, and vain, and drunk with pride. They run blindly after what is evil. The ends they work for are unclean. They are sure that life has only one purpose: gratification of the senses. And so they are plagued by innumerable cares, from which death alone can release them. Anxiety binds them with a hundred chains, delivering them over to lust and wrath. They are ceaselessly busy, piling up dishonest gains to satisfy their cravings.

“‘I wanted this and today I got it. I want that: I shall get it tomorrow. All these riches are now mine: soon I shall have more. I have killed this enemy. I will kill all the rest. I am a ruler of men. I enjoy the things of this world. I am successful, strong and happy. Who is my equal? I am so wealthy and so nobly born. I will sacrifice to the gods. I will give alms. I will make merry.’ That is what they say to themselves, in the blindness of their ignorance.

“They are addicts of sensual pleasure, made restless by their many desires, and caught in the net of delusion. They fall into the filthy hell of their own evil minds. Conceited, haughty, foolishly proud, and intoxicated by their wealth, they offer sacrifice to God in name only, for outward show, without following the sacred rituals. These malignant creatures are full of egoism, vanity, lust, wrath, and consciousness of power. They loathe me, and deny my presence both in themselves and in others. They are enemies of all men and of myself; cruel, despicable and vile. I cast them back, again and again, into the wombs of degraded parents, subjecting them to the wheel of birth and death. And so they are constantly reborn, in degradation and delusion. They do not reach me, but sink down to the lowest possible condition of the soul.”

Am I an asura?

What are the basic traits that render someone an asura? The Upanishad has already given them: 1) spiritual blindness, 2) spiritual darkness, 3) spiritual ignorance, and 4) engaging in deeds that “kill” the awareness and the freedom of the eternal, immortal, divine self. The first three are what dispose us to the fourth, destructive trait. Krishna has already given us quite an exposition of the ways of the asuric personality, but it can all be summed up in their effect: the negation of consciousness of the individual spirit. Now this point that spiritual ignorance

is a matter of unawareness of the individual spirit, our own atman, is particularly important because many asuras think to hide their status under an externalized cloak of religiosity, of supposed belief in and dedication to God. But this is all nonsense. Saint John the Apostle comments that no one can legitimately claim to love God Whom they have not seen if they have no love for their fellow human beings whom they have seen. In the same way, it is absurd to pretend that we know or are aware of the infinite Spirit when we are not aware of the finite spirit—our own self—which is right within us. This is why Buddha simply refused to speak about God or gods, and insisted that each one must seek for nirvana alone, rejecting all other matters as harmful distractions.

Another Upanishad states that if we learn about water from a single cup of water we can then know about oceans of water. In the same way, if we come to truly comprehend our nature as spirit we will be able to know God the Infinite Spirit. Thus self-knowledge—knowledge of our spirit—is essential. Shankara says that until we know the self we are all asuras in the absolute sense, but if we are seeking to know the self I expect the distinction is not so drastic.

An asura, then, is one whose life and thought obscure and darken the inner consciousness so the true self remains unknown and buried—often even unsuspected as to its existence. It has nothing to do with what philosophers and theologians say about it; the matter is thoroughly pragmatic. Do we or don't we, are we or aren't we? Verbal claims mean nothing here. State of being alone matters.

The worlds of the asuras

Because it is their will, asuras are born over and over in worlds “enveloped in blind darkness” at the time of their death, earthly or astral. Naturally our thoughts go to the ideas of “hell” so beloved to all religionists, east and west, whether it is the absurdly simplistic fire pit of Christianity or the horrifically complex and lurid hell(s) of Hinduism, Taoism, or Buddhism. But what is this world in which we presently find ourselves—a world ravaged with hatred, violence, disease, cruelty, and aggressive ignorance and greed? The fact that there is also kindness, love, mercy, and toleration in the world makes it even more crazy: schizophrenic and schizophrenogenic (making us crazy). No wonder *The Onion*, a satirical magazine, ran an article entitled: “God Diagnosed With Bipolar Disorder.” It might seem blasphemous, but it is the preposterous religion prevailing in the West that is blasphemous, and the satire is just pointing it out.

Someone once asked Paramhansa Yogananda if he believed in hell. Paramhansaji smiled and asked: “Where do you think you are?” A very good question, indeed.

We write our own ticket by the way we think and act. No amount of rationalization or assurance from others will change this fact. If we seek darkness we will find darkness; if we seek the light we will find the light. Nothing more; nothing less.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”¹⁵

Just be aware of the consequences.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:7,8

The Undivided Unmoving Self

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

The teachings of the upanishads are the supreme expressions of the eternal wisdom, the eternal vision of the Vedic Seers. Consequently, though simple in their mode of expression, they can be extremely hard to grasp. The rishis lived in a state of consciousness almost opposite to that of most of us. But it is possible of attainment, and so the wise cultivate it. Yet we need guidance along the way, and need to carefully look into the upanishadic dicta for that guidance. There are many things that we need not know, but the truths embodied in the upanishads and their inspired summary, the Bhagavad Gita, must be known by all who would ascend to higher life. So they merit our intent consideration.

The four levels of understanding

During the last week of his earthly life, Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover season. At one point, while speaking to the crowd, he prayed: “Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him.”¹⁶ And of course a third contingency *heard nothing*. This is how it is in this world of unreality when Reality impinges on it. According to the level of development, so the encountering individual reacts to the impingement.

In Indian philosophy there are a lot of numerical divisions, but one of the most prevalent is that of Four. To list some: there are four ages (yugas) of human history, there are four modes of consciousness (waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep and turiya—consciousness itself), there are four stages of dharmic life (student, family, semi-solitary, and monastic), and of course there are four castes (shudra, vaishya, kshatriya and brahmin). All of these relate to the evolutionary development of the individual (as Krishna says: guna and karma) and are fundamentally a matter of internal disposition and capacity. These four levels (is it an accident there are four Gospels?) are depicted in this event. Some people heard what was spoken and knew it was the voice of God; some heard a voice—not the actual words—and thought it was an angel speaking; some heard an indistinct sound and thought it was thunder; and others (no doubt the majority) heard nothing at all. It is not an event that matters as much as our comprehension of it.

Yes, that is everything: comprehension. And that takes place only according to our state of inner development. Krishna spoke of this in the beginning of his instruction to Arjuna at Kurukshetra, saying: “There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.”¹⁷ Here again are the four levels of comprehension. We pass from one to another in ascending steps only through inner cultivation—in other words, only through meditation, but meditation supported by a entire way of life that facilitates it—in other words: dharma. For if there is neither the practice nor the support for the practice, little will result in

¹⁶ John 12:28,29

¹⁷ Bhagavad Gita 2:29

the way of developing consciousness. And if consciousness is not developed the teachings of the great sages will be little understood by us, and perhaps greatly misunderstood or just not understood at all.

Sri Ramakrishna told about a certain group of yogis who were wont to challenge a person with the words: “What station are you dwelling in?” By “station” they meant the habitual state of the individual’s mind. The next verse of the Isha Upanishad is not easy to grasp because it speaks of a mode of being far different from our usual condition. So it will be a real test as to what “station” of consciousness we are dwelling in, as we try to decode it. Here it is:

“The Self is one. Unmoving, it moves swifter than thought. The senses do not overtake it, for always it goes before. Remaining still, it outstrips all that run. Without the Self, there is no life.”¹⁸

“The Self is one”

“One” has two meanings in Eastern thought: 1) number and 2) quality. This a very important point, since many controversies have arisen philosophically simply because Western thinkers tend to limit “one” to a numerical value only. The incredibly bitter and violent controversy over the so-called “Monophysite heresy” in early Christianity in which tens of thousands of Egyptians and Syrians were killed by the armies of the Byzantine empire, took place only because the Italian-Byzantines¹⁹ could not grasp what the “heretics” meant by the simple word *monos* when applied to spiritual matters. Both meanings, number and quality, have significance for us who, like the Four Kumaras, are intent on the knowing of the self.

The principle that the self is one should set us to thinking about our own present self-concept and—perhaps even more important—the way we live out our self-concept. Many people think one thing intellectually (or at least verbally, for public consumption) and think another instinctively. For example, I knew a minister who was once challenged by a self-styled atheist who spent about an hour expounding the “truth” of atheism and the folly of theism. When he was finished the minister said: “There are two points about all that you have just said. One: it is complete nonsense. Two: you do not believe a word of it yourself.” The man threw his right hand up in the air and declaimed: “I swear to God in heaven that I *do*!”

Somewhere I have already mentioned that an Eastern Christian theological student once remarked to me that the worse thing that had ever happened to Western Christianity and Western philosophy in general was the invention of the “pie chart”—those round diagrams divided into “slices” that plagued us throughout school in many subjects, from mathematics to sociology. “People have come to think that they are conglomerations of pieces that make up a whole, rather than a single homogenous being,” he explained. How many times do people speak of having several “roles” in life or of wearing many “hats.” Fragmentation is a terrible plague destroying our capacity to either see or attain unity-integration of our being. We think it is all right to be multiple persons. Where this all began with us is buried in the past, but the present reality cannot be denied. Drawn out from our center of unity, we say: “I am a businessman, a spouse, a parent, a citizen...” etc., rather than: “I am a single person who functions in the area of business, marriage, parenthood, citizenship...” etc. This no small thing, and certainly not merely a philosophical nicety. This is a serious mental and spiritual

¹⁸ Isha Upanishad 4

¹⁹ Despite the efforts of chauvanistic Greeks who wish to equate “Byzantine” with “Hellenic,” the original Byzantines were all Italians, being the Roman Court transplanted to Byzantium by the half-Italian, half-British Emperor Constantine.

disorder. Being both fragmented and dispersed in our energies and awareness, rather than operating from a central point of order, the mirror of our life is shattered into innumerable fragments that cannot convey any coherent image of our “face.” The unity that is the true image is defaced, effaced, and even erased—as far as our consciousness is concerned, even though our true nature can never be altered in any manner. Struggling and submerged in the illusion of multiplicity, the truth of our unity is far from us. For we are not just one numerically, we are absolutely one in nature. This is an eternal truth that must be regained by us. How to do so? By the only process that really unifies the consciousness: meditation.

“Unmoving, it moves swifter than thought”

How can the self move swifter than thought and yet be unmoving? This is not some koan-like platitude meant to faze our mind in relation to self-knowledge; it is simple fact. The self, the spirit, is completely outside of time and space (which are illusions, anyway), yet it can scan time and space, moving backward and forward simply because of the fact that it is one. Being one in the truest sense, the self is everywhere—since there really is no “where” at all. The self is truly Whole and therefore all-embracing. It moves swifter than thought, because a thought requires a time—however small—to arise or be expressed. The self, in contrast, exists only in the Now. The questions “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?” “What was I in the past?” and “What shall I be in the future?” are valuable because they set us on the quest to the discovery that we do not come or go, nor do we have a past or future—only a Present. When Sri Ramana Maharshi was at the end of his physical embodiment he commented: “They say I am ‘going,’ but where shall I go?” Some years later Sri Anandamayi Ma visited Ramanashram. When the Maharshi’s disciples asked her to stay there, feeling that in her they had “refound” their guru, she simply remarked: “I neither come nor go.” This is true of us, as well.

“The senses do not overtake it, for always it goes before”

The self does not move, but it is “always before” the questing senses in the sense that it is always out of their reach. The Mandukya Upanishad, speaking of the consciousness of the self, of turiya, describes it as “not subjective experience, nor objective experience, nor experience intermediate between these two, nor is it a negative condition which is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. It is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression,...it is pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the supreme good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone!” Who can say any more?

“Remaining still, it outstrips all that run”

The self is unmoving, as we have been told. Hence, any “movement” is incompatible with it and blots it from our awareness. That which moves cannot possibly perceive it, nor can any process of movement (including the labyrinthine ways of so much “yoga”) ever result in touching or seeing it. Rather, movement must cease, as Patanjali points out in the very beginning of the Yoga Sutras: Yoga is the cessation of movement in the mind-substance. In other words, when we stop “running” we will rest in our self.

“Without the Self, there is no life”

This is perhaps the hardest lesson for human beings to learn: *Without the Self, there is no life*. We may engage in frantic activity, running here and there and “accomplishing” tremendous things, indulging the senses to the maximum and immersing ourselves in ambitions, emotions, and “relationships,” but through it all the truth is simply this: we are dead, mere wraiths feeding desperately on a shadow life that is no life at all—not even a poor imitation. In the self alone do we find life. How hard this is to learn, and how much harder it is to follow through on, for it inevitably leads to the total renunciation of all that is not the self—in other words, to the renunciation of everything we hold dear and identify with as being ours and our “self” when they are no such thing at all. This is a bitter insight in the beginning, but as our inner eye begins to adjust to the truth of it, we find it the source of greatest joy.

Who knows the Atman
Knows that happiness
Born of pure knowledge:
The joy of sattwa.
Deep his delight
After strict self-schooling:
Sour toil at first
But at last what sweetness,
The end of sorrow.²⁰

He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.
Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined.

Not shaken by adversity,
Not hankering after happiness:
Free from fear, free from anger,
Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined.²¹

The recollected mind is awake
In the knowledge of the Atman
Which is dark night to the ignorant:
The ignorant are awake in their sense-life
Which they think is daylight:
To the seer it is darkness.²²

This is the state of enlightenment in Brahman:

²⁰ Bhagavad Gita 18:37. The next verse says: “Senses also have joy in their marriage with things of the senses, sweet at first but at last how bitter: steeped in rajas, that pleasure is poison.”

²¹ Bhagavad Gita 2:55, 56

²² Bhagavad Gita 2:69

A man does not fall back from it
Into delusion.
Even at the moment of death
He is alive in that enlightenment:
Brahman and he are one.²³

So, with his heart serene and fearless,
Firm in the vow of renunciation,
Holding the mind from its restless roaming,
Now let him struggle to reach my oneness,
Ever-absorbed, his eyes on me always,
His prize, his purpose.²⁴

“When a man has achieved non-attachment, self-mastery and freedom from desire through renunciation, he reaches union with Brahman, who is beyond all action.”²⁵

A great deal is involved when we sincerely pray: “Lead me from death to immortality.”

²³ Bhagavad Gita 2:72

²⁴ Bhagavad Gita 6:14

²⁵ Bhagavad Gita 18:49

The Ever-Present Self

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

“To the ignorant the Self appears to move–yet it moves not. From the ignorant it is far distant–yet it is near. It is within all, and it is without all.”²⁶

“The Self appears to move–yet it moves not”

We have just covered the fact that, being outside of the illusions of time and space, the self neither “moves” nor goes through any type of change whatsoever. Yet it “experiences” a multiplicity of externalities as the unmoving witness–momentarily caught up in the movie and thinking it is inside it and undergoing the changes in the scenario. Just as imagining seeing or doing something is not the same as seeing or doing it, so observing the motion picture of countless lives with their attendant joys and sorrows is not the same as actually being born, living, and dying over and over. But we are deluded into thinking so, and the upanishadic sage is endeavoring to wake us up, just as we awaken someone who is having a nightmare and calling out in pain or fear. We, however, having become accustomed (even addicted) to the nightmare, are a lot more difficult to awaken.

“It is far distant–yet it is near”

Since the self is existing in eternity, transcending any degree of relativity, it could not be “further” away from the relative realm of experience (not existence, because the relative does not actually “exist” at all except as an illusion). On the other hand, since relativity is only a concept, the self is the nearest possible because it alone is actually present!

At the end of the Syrian Jacobite Liturgy the celebrant gives a blessing beginning: “You who are far and you who are near....” The reference is not to those who are at the back of the church and those who are at the front, but to those who are far and near in their minds and hearts.

For those who are immersed in the illusion of relativity, nothing could be further away than the transcendent self. Yet, since as I have said, the self alone is ever present, it is nearer than any relative experiencing. It is, as the Kena Upanishad says, the “ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of speech....also breath of the breath, and eye of the eye.”²⁷

“It is within all, and it is without all”

Nothing can exist apart from the self—even an illusion. A hallucination is a “thing” even though it is solely mental. The self is the substratum upon and within which everything subsists, the screen on which the light-and-shadow play of “life” is projected. It is itself the basis of all that is perceived. From one perspective it can be said that the self (consciousness) is inside everything. From another, since it is forever separate from all things, it can be spoken of as outside–alien to–all things. Whichever way you say it, the idea is the same: the self never touches any “thing.”

²⁶ Isha Upanishad 5

²⁷ Kena Upanishad 1:2

The effect of “seeing true”

“He who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, hates none.”²⁸ Here we come to the practical application of what the upanishad is telling us about the self. (This is the inestimable value of the Bhagavad Gita. Where the Upanishads express spiritual mathematics in a usually abstract manner, the Gita outlines both the upanishadic principles and what the result will be when they are followed or realized, defining spiritual realities in practical, observable terms.)

If we never lose sight of the self, then we will be able to perceive what is not the self. And since what is not the self is not even real, why would we hate it? Conversely, how could we hate or be averse to the real self? This vision is the foundation of dynamic even-mindedness.

It is also the absolute end of all delusion and negative reaction to it, for the upanishad concludes: “To the illumined soul, the Self is all. For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?”²⁹

²⁸ Isha Upanishad 6

²⁹ Isha Upanishad 7

The All-Embracing Self

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

“Where one sees nothing but the One, hears nothing but the One, knows nothing but the One—there is the Infinite. Where one sees another, hears another, knows another—there is the finite. The Infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal.”³⁰

“To the illumined soul, the Self is all. For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?

“The Self is everywhere. Bright is he, bodiless, without scar of imperfection, without bone, without flesh, pure, untouched by evil. The Seer, the Thinker, the One who is above all, the Self-Existent—he it is that has established perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time.”³¹

“The Self is everywhere”

Being outside of time and space the self is both everywhere and nowhere—depending on one’s point of reference. One thing is definite: the self cannot be separated from to any degree and is always present in the fullest measure. This being so, we need not seek the self, but only *realize* it. We are always seeing, touching, and living in the self, yet we do not recognize it, just as fish have no perception of water because of its intimate and integral connection with them. The self is even more immediate to us than is water to the fish.

The most practical application of this truth is simple: We should always be aware of the self and centered in the self. And that is done by the continual meditation and japa of Om.

“Meditate on Om as the Self.”³²

“The Self [atman] is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self. He who knows It thus enters the Self [Supreme Spirit] with his self [individual spirit].”³³

“Directly realize the self by meditating on Om.”³⁴

“The syllable ‘Om’ is the self.”³⁵

“Earnest seekers who, incessantly and with a steady mind, repeat ‘Om’ will attain success. By repetition of the pure ‘Om’ the mind is withdrawn from sense objects and becomes one with the Self.”³⁶

“Bright is he”

In the Katha Upanishad it is said of the self: “Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning—nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. *He shining, everything shines.*”³⁷ The self is illumined by no external

³⁰ Chandogya Upanishad 7:24:1

³¹ Isha Upanishad 7, 8

³² Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6

³³ Mandukya Upanishad 1,8,12

³⁴ Vedantasara Upanishad 1

³⁵ Ribhu Gita 10:22

³⁶ Ramana Maharshi, *Sri Ramana Gita* 3:10,11, Ganapati Muni

³⁷ Katha Upanishad 2:2:15. The same statement is found in Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:11.

light, but rather illumines all itself. We could shine the brightest of lights into the eyes of a dead man and he would see nothing. But if the self is present to enliven him, then he will. The self is known–seen–by the self, and therefore it is called *swayamprakash*: self-illuminated. Hence only those in contact with their self can be said to possess illumination to any degree. Those who under the banner of “devotion” obsess on external practices and deities can only dwell in the “light that is darkness.”³⁸ We must seek illumination in the self alone, keeping in mind that God is the Self of the self, that to seek one is to seek the other.

Sukram, the word translated “bright,” also means pure in the sense of being of such perfect clarity that no light is obscured. For it is from the core of the self that the Pure Light of God shines forth. Therefore, as just pointed out, to attain self-knowledge is to realize both the atman and the Paramatman. Only when we are centered in our self can we see God,³⁹ and only when we are centered in God can we truly know our self.

In a flawless crystal, what do we see? Nothing. So also, in the self there is nothing seen, for all “things” are transcended, and pure Being alone remains in our consciousness. Wherefore the Chandogya Upanishad tells us: “Where one sees nothing but the One, hears nothing but the One, knows nothing but the One—there is the Infinite. Where one sees another, hears another, knows another—there is the finite. The Infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal.”⁴⁰

“Bodiless”

Obviously the self is not material, but it is necessary for us to further realize that the self never touches materiality, that it never “has” a body in the sense that it is integrated with a body and either affects it or is affected by it. This is extremely important, for religion (and a lot of “yoga”) usually leads us astray by getting us to be involved in a multitude of activities that—including intellectual study and conceptualizations—are taking place only in the various bodies (koshas) and therefore have nothing whatsoever to do with the self, and hence are usually irrelevant. It is true that we need to purify and refine the bodies so they will cease to veil or obscure the self, but we should understand that the entire process takes place outside the self and never affects the self to any degree.

It is also necessary to comprehend that the self is not really “in” the body(ies) at all, for by its very nature it cannot be encompassed or contained by anything, including the body. “They are contained in me, but I am not in them,”⁴¹ says Krishna. And the same is true of our own self.

To realize the self we must disengage our awareness totally from the bodies, although in the practice of meditation we use the bodies as stepping-stones to approach the self and eventually transcend them altogether. So we need not reject the bodies—simply have the correct perspective regarding them.

“Without scar of imperfection”

Imperfection can occur only in the level of relativity. Being eternally outside of relative existence it is not possible for the self to ever be “marked” for either good or bad—neither of which even exists for the self. In Yoga Sutra 1:24, Patanjali describes the Supreme Lord,

³⁸ “If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:23)

³⁹ “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

⁴⁰ Chandogya Upanishad 7:24:1

⁴¹ Bhagavad Gita 7:12

saying: “Ishwara is a distinct spirit, untouched by troubles, actions and their results, and latent impressions.” The relevant idea here is that God is beyond all action and therefore incapable of either incurring karma or of being conditioned or affected in any way by action—since He never acts. Exactly the same is true of the self.

“Without bone, without flesh”

Obviously the self has no body—that has already been said—so why this statement about the self being without bone or flesh? The idea being presented is that the self has no “inner” or “outer.” It has no essence as a substratum or framework (skeleton) which can become the ground or basis of another, external entity that is an extension or mutation of itself. The self has neither parts nor appendages (upadhis). It is thoroughly homogenous and absolutely one. It cannot be “more” itself or “less” itself. There are no gradations or shadings in the self. It simply IS.

“Pure”

We have already considered the purity of the self and need only add one more point: The self is also “pure” because there is nothing intervening between the self and anything else—including God. It is absolute and direct without admixture of any kind.

“Untouched by evil”

Obviously the self is untouched by evil, for it is not touched (affected) by anything at all or at any time.

“The Seer”

The unwitnessed witness is the self. In truth there is no other witness on the individual level because the senses, mind, and intellect are mere energy constructs that have no consciousness of their own. The eye never really sees, nor does the ear hear. No more does the brain or intellect. Rather, the spirit that is consciousness witnesses their messages, therefore the upanishadic seer said: “The Self is ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of speech. He is also breath of the breath, and eye of the eye. Having given up the false identification of the Self with the senses and the mind, and knowing the Self to be Brahman, the wise, on departing this life, become immortal.”⁴² And of Brahman it was said: “He who knows Brahman to be the life of life, the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind—he indeed comprehends fully the cause of all causes.”⁴³

Regarding the self and the Self of the self, Krishna stated:

Watching over the ear and the eye, and presiding
There behind touch, and taste, and smell, he is also
Within the mind: he enjoys and suffers
The things of the senses.⁴⁴

“The Thinker”

⁴² Kena Upanishad 1:2

⁴³ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:18

⁴⁴ Bhagavad Gita 15:9

Not being the brain, only its witness and not its possessor, the self is here called “the thinker” only as an attempt to convey the idea that it is the self that both witnesses and knows what it is witnessing. It is not just a screen on which the motion picture of life is projected, nor is it a consciousness of objects alone without cognition of their nature. An infant or an animal perceives exactly what an adult human being perceives, but has no idea what it is perceiving—or even that it perceives, in many cases. The self, on the other hand, does indeed know and comprehend what is presented to its view. And because of its proximity the will and intellect respond to the stimuli, mirroring the consciousness that is the self. Consequently they are often mistaken for the self or wrongly supposed to have a consciousness and intelligence of their own.

“The One who is above all”

There is nothing higher than the self, nothing beyond the self. What about God? God and the self being one, even God should not be thought of as beyond or above it. Further, Brahman is not a “thing” in a hierarchal chain of being that It could possibly be said to be “above” or “below” any thing whatsoever.

This statement is extremely practical, for it is impossible to conduct a spiritual life without the correct perspective: the spirit is supreme. Not only is everything lesser than the spirit, in truth everything else is *nothing* in comparison. Those who do not hold this conviction really have no spiritual life in the truest sense. *God First. God Alone.* This is the only correct perspective.

“Devotees seek to know him by study, by sacrifice, by continence, by austerity, by detachment. To know him is to become a seer. Desiring to know him, and him alone, monks renounce the world. Realizing the glory of the Self, the sages of old craved not sons nor daughters. “What have we to do with sons and daughters,” they asked, “we who have known the Self, we who have achieved the supreme goal of existence?” No longer desiring progeny, nor wealth, nor life in other worlds, they entered upon the path of complete renunciation.”⁴⁵

“The Self-Existent”

The spirit never had a beginning. It always was. Again, this does not mean that the atman is separate from Brahman, or in any way independent of Brahman. Brahman being self-existent and eternal, so also is the self. It is necessary for us to realize that NOTHING conditions or really affects the self—that it is absolutely independent of all objects, places, or conditions. Otherwise we fall into the labyrinth of confusion and false identities

“He it is that has established perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time”

Once again, the unity-identity of the individual self and the Supreme Self cause the upanishadic rishi to make a statement that applies to both, although we are used to thinking only in terms of the Absolute Self. Really, hardly any of us—being conditioned by Western religion—actually believe that there is “perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time” or at the present moment. This reminds me of an incident in the life of Sri Ma Anandamayi. One of those ever-present I Am Going To Make The World A Better Place types once remarked to her that he wanted to attain realization so he could work to make the world a perfect entity.

⁴⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:22

Mother instantly replied: “Who do you think that it is not perfect right now?” And of course it is. It is a mess because we are entities that at the moment need to work our way through a mess! When we come to the point where order is what we need, we will be transferred to an orderly world. This one will remain as it is for those students of life who also need to find themselves in the midst of a mess. The world is a mirror of our mind. We may like to be Pharisees⁴⁶ who think we are not as those around us—but we *are*. Everything we see in this world is in our mind to some degree, otherwise we would not be here. *If we do not like what we see, then we should change ourselves.* There is no other remedy, and there certainly is no escape from the necessity for change.

So it is we ourselves that have brought us into this world and provided for ourselves everything we need to evolve through reacting to and solving the problems set before us. A person who whines and pities himself does not learn and therefore is continually faced with the same situations. Have you ever known the kind of person that perpetually complains about being “let down” by others, or those that have a list of people or situations that “hurt” or cheated them? They are simply slow learners that deserve no pity, for they are doing it all to themselves. Every day Theravada Buddhist monks recite verses of wisdom, some of which say: “I have nothing but my actions; I shall never have anything but my actions.” There it is. Being lazy, cowardly, and egotistical, we hate these truths. But they are the truth and until we face them we will keep on whirling and whining, blaming God, the universe, and everybody else but the real culprit: ourselves. (Note I say “ourselves,” not “our selves.”) Cosmic Destiny is determined by each one of us. God simply has nothing to do with it except for providing us the environment in which we can work out our will. We can see from this that a lot of petitionary prayer and “surrender to the divine will” is idiotic and gets us nowhere. The day we start taking full—and exclusive—responsibility for our past, present, and future is the day we will begin moving toward real perfection.

⁴⁶ “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” (Luke 18:11)

Perspective on Life

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

The Full (Purna) picture

“To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to life in the world, and to a greater darkness they who devote themselves only to meditation. Life in the world alone leads to one result, meditation alone leads to another. So have we heard from the wise. They who devote themselves both to life in the world and to meditation, by life in the world overcome death, and by meditation achieve immortality.”⁴⁷

Wise teachers have pointed out that even though non-duality is the actual state of things, in our present condition of being netted in Maya we need to know that all is one but live as though duality is also real. The world may not be ultimately real, but we need to work through the puzzles presented to us by relative experience.

Two serious errors can be committed by the thoughtful aspirant: 1) the conclusion that since “none of it is real” nothing really matters and there is no need for spiritual endeavor; and 2) the conclusion that since only the spiritual is real we should ignore the external and the material aspects of life and put all our attention on the inner spiritual side of life. But right there the error is uncovered, for the spiritual is only a “side” of life—as is the material—and together they make the two-sided whole. Or we can look at it in an even better and truer way: the material is the spiritual and therefore demands and deserves our full attention as well as the obviously spiritual aspects of life. This is the meaning of the Vedic verse beginning *purnamadah purnamidam*:

That is the Full, this is the Full.

The Full has come out of the Full.

If we take the Full from the Full

It is the Full that yet remains.

The two are really—and always—the One. To reject or turn from one is to reject and turn from the All. It cannot be without meaning that the bases of Sanatana Dharma—the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Brahma Sutras—were written by sages who lived fully in the world with families and their attendant responsibilities, including that of making a livelihood. Of course it was the Satya Yuga then, and earthly life was very different from life in our present age. Nevertheless, those who like to excuse themselves from striving for self-realization by citing their involvement in “the world” and worldly responsibilities should consider the historical facts. (And anyway, where exactly do they think the monastics are living?)

From darkness to greater darkness

“To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to life in the world, and to a greater darkness they who devote themselves only to meditation.”

The Purna, the Full (it also means the Complete) is one, yet it is dual. This makes no sense, but considering the limitation of our intellects that should be no surprise. It is our

⁴⁷ Isha Upanishad 9-11

intuition that must come into function when we begin dealing with these higher spheres of reality. We, too, are dual, being image-replicas of the Divine Archetype. Just as God is both relative and absolute, both immanent and transcendent, so are we on a miniature scale. We, too, then, must learn to function fully in both spheres, for since they are essentially one, if we do not so function we will be partial, incomplete, and therefore faulty rather than perfect—which originally meant to be complete rather than without fault. (“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”⁴⁸)

One of the fundamental errors of dualistic religion—Christianity in particular—is its setting of the material against the spiritual and thereby insisting that the material must be rejected and the spiritual alone embraced. This produces deep spiritual psychosis, for it is simply impossible to do and also involves a rejection of an eternal part of ourselves (and God). Sanatana Dharma in contrast makes it clear that the two are really one and must both be cultivated—according to the principles of dharma, of course—for us to attain the consciousness of perfect unity in ourselves and in God.

Those who “devote themselves only to life in the world” become sunk in the limitations of materiality and addicted to its vagaries. Egoism and intense selfishness and exploitation of both the world and those living in it with us can be the sole result of such a limited focus. Having only a perspective of mortality, the higher nature of the individual is suppressed to give free rein to the “dog-eat-dog, every-man-for-himself” attitude that must arise from preoccupation with external existence. Having no idea of the true nature of either the world, ourselves, or our fellow human beings, only chaos and destruction can come to us.

On the other hand, those “who devote themselves only to meditation” or abstract philosophizing to the exclusion of material considerations and practical living, come to a worse result: complete psychological disintegration (literally) and alienation from any form of reality. Hypocrisy also results, because to even eat and drink is to admit the necessity of physicality, and that food must come from somewhere, so dependence on “the ignorant and astray” becomes necessary. It reminds me of a cartoon I saw years ago in an emigre Russian newspaper just after the United States had supplied the Soviet Union with incredibly huge amounts of grain and saved their economy and the life of millions. Two old ladies were sweeping the street in Red Square. One was saying to the other: “It is good we did not kill all the Capitalists; otherwise we would have starved to death.” How can a person justify living off those whose earthly involvement they despise and condemn? The Bhagavad Gita discusses this matter thoroughly and points out the folly of the “spirituals” who pretend to have transcended worldly concerns.

We must function in both matter and spirit. Both elements must be integrated through the following of dharma to complete the picture and solve the evolutionary puzzle. The material must be spiritualized and the spiritual must be materialized in the sense of making both practical and beneficial to one another. In this endeavor the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita are indispensable, for: “Life in the world alone leads to one result, meditation alone leads to another. So have we heard from the wise.”⁴⁹

From death to immortality

“They who devote themselves both to life in the world and to meditation, by life in the

⁴⁸ Matthew 5:48

⁴⁹ Isha Upanishad 10

world overcome death, and by meditation achieve immortality.”⁵⁰

Life is not just some maze to be somehow gotten through, or a Monopoly board with random advances and regressions—and there is certainly *no* Get Out of Jail Free! Rather, life demands the fullest exercise of the two faculties that mark human beings out from the rest of earthly life-forms: developed reason and intuition. Intelligence of the highest order is necessary. This does not mean that the aspirant needs to be an “intellectual,” but he must be intelligent. Stupid people simply do not make it—mostly because stupid people never seek it. Nor can the seeker’s intelligence be kept on the shelf for only occasional use and amusement. At all times the yogi must be keenly aware of what is going on in his life sphere and ever seeking to understand and work out the mystery. As already said, he needs highly developed intuition as well. Both these are only produced by meditation. This is because both intelligence and intuition (direct knowledge) are divine attributes. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna declares himself to be intelligence (7:10; 10:34) and the knowledge of the mystic (9:12). In the Katha Upanishad Brahman is said to be the “intelligence of the intelligent,” and in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad the sage Gargya says: “The being who dwells in the heart as intelligence—him I meditate upon as Brahman.” I am not speaking of cunning or cleverness or “savvy;” many stupid—and most evil—people possess them. I am speaking of the intelligence which only arises in those who are of highly evolved consciousness.

It is those who possess right intelligence and right intuition that can live both the inner and outer lives simultaneously—not first one and then the other in alternating cycles—in a spiritually productive (i.e., evolutionary) manner. By doing so they will accomplish two things. One: they will come to understand the real meaning and purpose of all they experience and do and thereby learn the lessons for which they came into relative existence. Two: they will come to experience (not just intellectually think) that the two are really one, manifestations of the One. Having seen the One in all, they have attained immortality even in this mortal life.

A final point. Notice that the upanishadic sage speak of being *devoted* to the outer and inner lives. This means steadiness and regularity in practice as well as adamant adherence to the required disciplines such as yama and niyama. But most important it means *wanting*, even *loving*, to lead the outer and inner lives according to the precepts of dharma. There is no place here for grudging admittance of necessity, of stingy eking out of the barest minimum that is required, grumbling and resenting and wishing it need not be so. Such persons should not even try. They are not just losers, they are losses.

See the perspective of a Christ! Crucifixion was the most horrible of deaths, yet according to Saint Paul: “Jesus... for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.”⁵¹ What a different perspective from the morbid and sentimental carryings-on over the passion of Jesus that Christians engage in. Loving the world and the body that links them to the world, nothing seems to them more painful or tragic than the torture and death of that idol. But Jesus hastened to the mockery, the scourging, and the crucifixion *for the joy that was set before him*. Not wonder he has been misunderstood and rejected through the ages by those who bear his name.

Reinforcing the idea

“To darkness are they doomed who worship only the body, and to greater darkness they

⁵⁰ Isha Upanishad 11

⁵¹ Hebrews 12:2

who worship only the spirit. Worship of the body alone leads to one result, worship of the spirit leads to another. So have we heard from the wise. They who worship both the body and the spirit, by the body overcome death, and by the spirit achieve immortality.”⁵²

The basic idea of these verses has already been covered, but we should notice the use of the word “worship.” We are used to thinking of worship only in relation to God, but it comes from an older form, *worship*, which meant to acknowledge the value and significance of something. Therefore Swami Prabhavananda was wise in selecting this word for his translation.

The lesson here is the need to value both body and spirit. I know that Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other,”⁵³ but we are striving to be not men but gods, so we are going to have to manage it. And anyhow, we are not interesting in *serving* the body or the spirit but in *mastering* them.

The body is the instrument of evolution, so to despise and neglect it under the guise of spirituality is foolish. Any machine that malfunctions should be repaired, not despised and tossed away, the body included. Also, hidden within the body are many doorways to higher consciousness. Therefore the body must be worked on to become the evolutionary device it is intended to be. *The first step is purification, and that includes two major factors: celibacy and vegetarian diet.* There is no getting around it. Just take a look at those who are not purifying themselves in these two ways and you will have proof enough. All the rationalizing and mind-gaming in the world cannot contravene the truth: brahmacharya (continence) and ahimsa (non-killing), are absolute essentials for those who seek higher consciousness. Let us take a look at what the Chandogya Upanishad tells us about food.

“Food when eaten becomes threefold. What is coarsest in it becomes faeces, what is medium becomes flesh and what is subtlest becomes mind. Water when drunk becomes threefold. What is coarsest in it becomes urine, what is medium becomes blood and what is subtlest becomes prana. The mind, my dear, consists of food, the prana of water.”⁵⁴

“That, my dear, which is the subtlest part of curds rises, when they are churned and becomes butter. In the same manner, my dear, that which is the subtlest part of the food that is eaten rises and becomes mind. The subtlest part of the water that is drunk rises and becomes prana. Thus, my dear, the mind consists of food, the prana consists of water.”⁵⁵

Body and mind come from the food we eat. Thus our food must be both as pure as possible and also blessed by being offered to God. And the conduct of the body must be as pure as possible and its deeds worthy of being offered to God. Action and thought determine the quality of body and mind. Ethics and good thoughts are also essential, but purity of body and mind is the crown jewel. Through these means both body and spirit are truly worshipped and immortality is gained.

⁵² Isha Upanishad 12-14

⁵³ Matthew 6:24

⁵⁴ Chandogya Upanishad 5:5:1,2,4

⁵⁵ Chandogya Upanishad 6:6:1-3,5

Seeing Beyond the Sun

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

Upanishadic tradition

The final four verses of the Isha Upanishad are recited at the cremation of bodies in India, and are a prayer for ascension to the higher realms that are beyond the compulsion of rebirth in this world. These deal mainly with the sun. Throughout history and throughout the world the sun has been worshipped or considered a symbol of divinity. The full comprehension of the spiritual nature of the sun was discovered in India untold ages ago and embodied in the upanishads.

Light beyond the light

“The face of truth is hidden by thy golden orb, O Sun. That do thou remove, in order that I who am devoted to truth may behold its glory.”⁵⁶

The sun illumines us and shows us what we assume to be reality. But actually that “seeing” veils the Truth (Reality) behind that veil. Therefore we seek to pierce beyond it. However, the sun actually *is* that Reality, and we must approach it and petition for the removal of its outer light in order that we may behold its inner Light. (More on this later.)

The golden orb

The “golden orb” has more than one meaning, all of which are significant.

1) The most obvious meaning of the golden orb is the sun itself. All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depend upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution. Sunlight particularly stimulates the activity of the higher centers in the brain, especially that of the pineal gland. Even in the depths of the earth a sensitive man can tell when the sun rises and sets above him. The sun appears to illuminate us, but it is a light that covers the Light in order to lead us to the Light. We must use it to go beyond it.

2) All things have an inner and outer life, and that includes the sun. We may say that there is the outer sun of the material universe, and there is also the metaphysical sun of the psychic universe. They operate simultaneously, being the same thing. The sun truly awakens us in the deepest sense. As the germinating seed struggles upward toward the sun and out into its life-giving rays, so all higher forms of life reach out for the sun, which acts as a metaphysical magnet, drawing them upward and outward toward ever-expanding consciousness. The Chandogya Upanishad discusses it in this way: “Even as a great extending highway runs between two villages, this one and that yonder, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this one and that yonder. They start from the yonder sun and enter into the nadis. They start from the nadis and enter into the yonder sun....When a man departs from this body, then he goes upwards by these very rays or he goes up with the thought of Om. As his mind is failing, he goes to the sun. That, verily, is the gateway of the world, an entering in for the knowers, a shutting out for the non-knowers.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Isha Upanishad 15

⁵⁷ Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2,5

The solar rays do not just flow into this world, they also draw upward through the sun and beyond. In the human body the process of exhalation and inhalation is related to solar energy, and much of the solar power on which we subsist is drawn into the body through our breathing. The solar rays do not just strike the surface of our body, but actually penetrate into the physical nerves (nadis). The nadis are also the channels in the astral body that correspond to the physical nerves. Just as the electrical impulses flow through the physical nerves, the subtle life force, or prana, flows through the subtle nadis and keeps us alive and functioning. The prana, then, is a vehicle for the solar energies that produce evolution.

When the individual comes into manifestation on this earth he passes from the astral world into the material plane by means of the sun, which is a mass of exploding astral energies, not mere flaming gases. And when the individual has completed his course of evolution within this plane, upon the death of his body he rises upward in his subtle body and passes through the sun into the higher worlds, there to evolve even higher or to pass directly into the depths of the transcendent Brahman.

3) The golden orb is also the entire creation, the means by which through experience the individual spirits can evolve to perfect conscious union with God. Without it we would be unable to attain that union. Yet, just as we use a ladder or stair to ascend and then step beyond it, in the same way the creation is meant to be eventually transcended. We must therefore keep both these aspects in mind while living in this world.

4) The golden orb is also our own mind—that which perceives the world around us and the intelligence which comprehends what is going on and directs our lives accordingly. Potential is not enough; there must be actualization. It is our mind alone that can lead us beyond the mind, our intelligence alone that can lead us onward to intuition. At all stages the mind and intelligence are “golden,” but if we allow ourselves to become stagnated at any point they rapidly “tarnish” and turn from beneficial to harmful. Immersed in this creation, we are like the fish that must keep perpetually moving for they will die of suffocation if they come to a standstill. If we do not move forward we shall move backward—and often mistake it for progress. We must Get On and Get Beyond.

5) Our own self (atman) is also the golden orb. We must come to know our self—our *true* self—and delight in the self and wonder at its nature. But that is not enough. We must then pass onward to experience the Self of our self, the Paramatman. In a sense we transcend the self—but of course we do not, since the Supreme Self and our individual self are one. This transcendence must ever be kept in mind, for out of ignorance and even laziness a lot of people like the idea that we need only enter into the experience of our self and that is the end. The same wrong-headed view abrogates the need for our evolution and assumes that if we must smash the machine we will get the picture—or even worse, that there is no picture to see or even a seer to see it. However cleverly this view may be worded or how sophisticated it appears, it is nihilism of the deadliest sort, a ruinous pitfall.

6) The golden orb is also the evolutionary impulse within all things which, though life itself to the evolving spirit, yet urges us to continual transcendence of its various stages until we transcend it as well. It is a golden stair that urges us onward to the heights where it cannot come.

The Supreme Sun

The ultimate Golden Orb is the Supreme Self. That is what we are striving toward by the

five means just cited. Being transcendent, how shall we reach it? By means of Its immanence within the world in the form of the sacred syllable Om, the Pranava, the Life-giver.

“That which glows [i.e., the sun] is Om,” says the ancient Aitareya-Brahmana (5.32). The life-producing energies of the sun are the energies of Om. Om is the sun of body, mind, and spirit, the Life-Giver of all. All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depends upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution, awakening us in the deepest sense. Sunlight is the radiant form of Om. The sun initiates the entire solar system into Om. Human beings are solar creatures, therefore to intone Om is the most natural thing they can do.

“Now, verily, what is the udgitha is the Om. What is Om is the udgitha. And so verily, the udgitha is the yonder sun and the Om, for the sun is continually sounding ‘Om.’”⁵⁸ The most significant part of this verse is the statement that “the sun is continually sounding ‘Om,’” indicating that the evolutionary energy of the sun is a manifestation of Om. Our life depends on the light of the sun, thus our life is also a manifestation of the power of Om. The *japa* and meditation of Om aligns us with the solar powers that are Om and thereby greatly increase our life force and the evolution of all the levels of our being.

“Even as a great extending highway runs between two villages, this one and that yonder, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this one and that yonder. They start from the yonder sun and enter into the nadis [astral “nerves”]. They start from the nadis and enter into the yonder sun....When a man departs from this body, then he goes upwards by these very rays or he goes up with the thought of Om. As his mind is failing, he goes to the sun. That, verily, is the gateway of the world, an entering in for the knowers, a shutting out for the non-knowers.”⁵⁹ We have already cited this, but there are more meanings for us to explore. The *prana*, the breath, is a vehicle for the solar energies that produce evolution, and so we join Om to our breathing and merge it into the *pranic* flow. This practice conditions our subtle levels so that at the time of death we will be oriented toward the solar powers and can ascend upon them—especially if we continue our intonations of Om even after the body has been dropped. Those intonations will guarantee our ascent into the solar world. Those who have imbued themselves with the *Pranavic* vibrations will enter through the solar gate, whereas those who have not done so will be shut out by it and compelled to return to earthly rebirth.

“By means of Om he [the meditating yogi] sees the way, the way along which his *prana* goes; therefore one should always repeat It so that he goes along the right way: through the heart-gate, the air-gate, the gate which leads upward, and the opening of the gate of liberation which is known as the open orb [the sun.]”⁶⁰ Those who continually invoke and meditate upon Om during their lifetime will remember Om at the time of death, and by means of Om will ascend to the sun and beyond into the real Beyond.

“It is said: ‘Indeed the sun is this Om;’ therefore one should meditate and make himself ready to unite himself with it.”⁶¹ Sunlight is the radiant form of Om. The sun initiates the entire solar system into Om. Human beings are solar creatures, therefore to intone Om is the most natural things they can do.

⁵⁸ Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.1

⁵⁹ Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2,5

⁶⁰ Amritabindu Upanishad 25,26

⁶¹ Maitrayana Upanishad 6:3

“At the time of departure from this world, remember Om, the Lord, the Protector”⁶² says the Yajur Veda. Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita: “At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in Me. Then he will be united with Me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life. Therefore you must remember Me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon Me constantly, you will come to Me. Never doubt this. Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, Who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.”⁶³ Whatever we think of most during life we will think of at the time of our death, and that will determine our subsequent state. Those who continually invoke and meditate upon Om during their lifetime will remember Om at the time of death, and by means of Om will ascend to the sun and beyond into the real Beyond.

Qualified seers

Simply wanting a thing does not make it happen or come to us. In the same way, spiritual daydreaming is fruitless. Therefore, he who petitions for the removal of the golden orb describes himself as “I who am devoted to truth.” He is one who wishes to pass from the unreal to the Real, to no longer live in the magic of Maya, but to move onward to the Reality behind all appearance. And he does not just seek truth or think about it—he is *devoted* to truth. Only those “may behold its glory.”

Stop! so I may Go

“O nourisher, only seer, controller of all—O illumining Sun, fountain of life for all creatures—withhold thy light, gather together thy rays. May I behold through thy grace thy most blessed form. The Being that dwells therein even that Being am I.”⁶⁴

In Indian philosophy God is often thought of as Mother. This verse bears that out, speaking of the divine as the Nourisher of all beings, the Fountain of Life. God the Mother is frequently addressed in Sanskrit hymns as *Jagata Janani*, *Jagata Palani*—the Birthgiver and Nourisher of the world (jagat). In Eastern Christianity, one title given to the Virgin Mother Mary is “Life-giving Spring.” God is also the Seer of All, the Ruler of All, as this verse indicates.

The petitioner then makes an interesting request: “Withhold thy light, gather together thy rays.” How is this? Why does he not ask that the light should flood down upon him? Because the “light” he is speaking of is not the Absolute Light, but the light of relative existence which by its nature veils that Ultimate Light. He asks, then, that God withdraw the light of temporality in order that he might behold and enter into the Light of Eternity.

This has a yogic aspect, as well. We must withdraw all the scattered “rays” of our energies and awareness and unite them to our inmost consciousness. We must gather up that which is dispersed and fragmented and restore our original state of unity. Meditation is the only way this can be accomplished.

⁶² Yajur Veda 40:15

⁶³ Bhagavad Gita 8:5-10 (Prabhavananda translation).

⁶⁴ Isha Upanishad 16

The vision

“May I behold through thy grace thy most blessed form.” Two questions arise (or should arise) at these words. What is the grace of God? What is the form of God?

The grace of God is not some kind of favor or “goodie” dropped into our lap by God. Nor is grace something occasionally dispensed by God as a special token to the chosen. *All that exists—either relatively or absolutely—is the grace of God.* There is nothing that is not the grace of God. If we like, we may say that the grace of God is the Divine Plan for our liberation. And the creation, gross and subtle, is the means for the realization of that Plan, and is itself Grace Divine. So to petition God for grace is as silly as fish in the ocean praying for water. It is inseparable from us! The grace through which we behold God is the great onward movement initiated by God at the inception of the cosmos.

The Form of God is not a form such as that experienced in relative existence, but is the Substance, the Light, from which all forms arise. It can be said to be formless, and yet all forms exist within it eternally. As Sri Ma Anandamayi frequently said: “Nothing is lost There.” The Form “of” God IS God.

When we see God we also see ourselves in God and can then declare: “The Being that dwells therein even that Being am I.”

“Then Satyakama, son of Shibi, asked him [the Rishi Pippalada]: ‘Venerable Sir, what world does he who meditates on Om until the end of his life, win by That?’ To him, he said: ‘That which is the sound Om, O Satyakama, is verily the higher and the lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the wise man reach the one or the other.’...If he meditates on the Supreme Being [Parampurusha] with the Syllable Om, he becomes one with the Light, the Sun. He is led to the world of Brahman. He sees the Person that dwells in the body, Who is higher than the highest life....That the wise one attains, even by the mere sound Om as support, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Prashna Upanishad 5:1,2,5,7

The Final Aspiration

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

The poet Browning wrote of “the end of life for which the first was made.” That is a lovely expression, but very few really believe it and therefore rarely think of their life’s end. Those of us who seek liberation must from the very beginning be looking toward the end we desire. In the next to the last verse at the close of the Isha Upanishad we are given the perspective we should be living with every moment of our life if we would truly “come to a good end.”

Now

“Let my life now merge in the all-pervading life. Ashes are my body’s end. OM....O mind, remember Brahman. O mind, remember thy past deeds. Remember Brahman. Remember thy past deeds.”⁶⁶

Emily Dickenson wrote: “While others hope to go to heaven at last, I am going all along!” This is the only way for those who would succeed in spiritual life. Nothing should be delayed for the future—it is all now or not at all. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”⁶⁷

There are many partially awakened people who know that God is the only real goal. Yet they delay their endeavor. “After I get this,” they say, “then I will really dig in and seek God.” But they never do, for as soon as one little short-term goal is reached another arises that seems even more demanding. I know a woman that claimed she would intensely seek God the day after her only child graduated from high school. But then it became after his graduating from college. Then after he was married and “really settled down.” Death found her anticipating still another “after which,” but it was all over. And by her foolishness she had created in her mind the habit of postponing spiritual life, a habit that will surely carry over into the next life and perhaps into others.

How often do we think that the vision of God will somehow interfere with our life—when in reality we have no life outside that vision. Silly children, we dawdle and dally until the night falls, that “night in which no man can work”⁶⁸ which Jesus warned us about. “Now or never” happens to be the simple truth.

Merging in Life

Many people want to “embrace life” so they can egocentrically possess it and exploit it to the full. But they have no idea what life is. Just the opposite, for what they think is life is really death. “The all-pervading life” is the only life, for that is God. And the necessity is not to find or see God as an object (again, to possess), but to merge with God in complete unity-identity. That is, our consciousness must be completely merged in the infinite Consciousness, and irrevocably so. Just as a cup of water poured into the ocean cannot be drawn back out of the ocean, so we need to attain that state of unity which can never be reversed. Many yogis paddle their feet or go for a quick dip in the ocean of Satchidananda, but the goal is to unite

⁶⁶ Isha Upanishad 17

⁶⁷ II Corinthians 6:2

⁶⁸ John 9:4

with that ocean, to merge in it and become totally one with it. Consequently at ever moment of our life we must be holding in mind and living out the sankalpa: “Let my life now merge in the all-pervading life.”

Those who are unfit for union with God become all anxious and even fearful when they hear about merging with the Divine. “O! will I go out of existence?” they quaver. “What will happen to me?” Over and over again they plunge headlong into the sea of rebirth, never raising such questions about relative existence, but “going for it” heedlessly. Only when confronted with God do they develop prudence and caution. Jesus has assured us, though: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”⁶⁹ This is because we are truly negative—that is, we are absolutely backwards one hundred and eighty degrees. Consequently what we think will annihilate us will immortalize us, whereas what we think will make us live will destroy us.

Like the great master, Yogananda, we must pray: “Let me drown in Thine ocean and live!”

Understanding the destiny of the body

It is not a simple thing to rid ourselves of the conditionings of billions of lives wherein we identified completely with the body. Even when we have evolved enough to identify more with the mind and the spirit, still the body claims the majority of our attention—and attachment. It is completely reflexive with us, overriding any emotional or intellectual factors to the contrary. Therefore we must continually affirm in word, attitude, and act: “Ashes are my body’s end.” This will only seem painful or pessimistic if we are still identifying with the body. But if not, it will be as happy a statement as an affirmation that our prison is going to evaporate into dust.

We have died many times (or thought we did), but that did not free us at all. And in many lives we were no doubt cremated. Still, that accomplished nothing. Evidently there is a deeper meaning to the “ashes” that are the body’s end. It is the fire of wisdom that turns our “bodies” into ashes. Let us then be busy stoking the fires of yoga and getting on with the burning. Sadhus wear gerua, orange-red color, to remind them of the fire of discrimination and spirit-knowledge that must be perpetually burning in order to reduce all that impels us into embodiment to the ashes of freedom.

Flying from fear,
From lust and anger,
He hides in me
His refuge, his safety:
Burnt clean in the blaze of my being,
In me many find home.⁷⁰

The blazing fire turns wood to ashes:
The fire of knowledge turns all karmas to ashes.⁷¹

When the “bridges” of all bodies, subtle and gross, have been burned in the holy fires, then we will pass on into the kingdom of Infinity that is our eternal birthright.

⁶⁹ Luke 17:33

⁷⁰ Bhagavad Gita 4:10

⁷¹ Bhagavad Gita 4:37

Remember!

How to kindle the ignorance-consuming fire? The upanishadic sage continues: “O mind, remember Brahman. O mind, remember thy past deeds. Remember Brahman. Remember thy past deeds.”

“Remember Brahman” is extremely easy to say, but how is it done? The Upanishads do not waste our time, but go straight to the mark, saying:

“I will tell you briefly of that Goal which all the Vedas with one voice propound, which all the austerities speak of, and wishing for Which people practice discipline: It is Om.”⁷²

“Om is the Supreme Brahman.”⁷³

“God is the Syllable Om.”⁷⁴

“Om is Brahman, the Primeval Being.”⁷⁵

“That [Om] is the quintessence of the essences, the Supreme, the highest.”⁷⁶

“Om is Brahman.”⁷⁷

After the battle of Kurukshetra, before which he had spoken the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna again spoke to Arjuna at length. In that conversation he told him: “The gods, rishis, and the nagas, and the asuras, approaching Prajapati [the Creator], said to Him: ‘Tell us the highest good.’ To them who were inquiring about the highest good, the Venerable One said, ‘Om, which is Brahman in a single Syllable.’”⁷⁸

“The monosyllable Om is the highest Brahman,”⁷⁹ said the sage Manu, and Patanjali summed it all up by simply saying: “Its repetition and meditation is the way.”⁸⁰

To remember Brahman we engage in the japa and meditation of Om—simple and direct.

“One should meditate on this Syllable [Om].”⁸¹

“This [Om] is the best means [of attainment and realization]; this means is the Higher and Lesser Brahman. Meditating on Om, one becomes worthy of worship in the world of Brahman.”⁸²

“The Self [atman] is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self. He who knows It thus enters the Self [Supreme Spirit] with his self [individual spirit].”⁸³

“Taking as the bow the great weapon of the Upanishads [Om], one should place in It the arrow sharpened by meditation. Drawing It with a mind engaged in the contemplation of That [Brahman], O beloved, know that Imperishable Brahman as the target. The Syllable Om is the bow: one’s self, indeed, is the arrow. Brahman is spoken of as the target of that. It is to be hit without making a mistake. Thus one becomes united with it [Brahman] as the arrow becomes one with the target. He in Whom the sky, the earth, and the interspace are woven, as also the

⁷² Katha Upanishad 1. 2.15-17

⁷³ Svetasvatara Upanishad 1:7

⁷⁴ Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:17

⁷⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.1.1

⁷⁶ Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.3

⁷⁷ Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1

⁷⁸ Anugita XI

⁷⁹ Manu Smriti 2:83,87

⁸⁰ Yoga Sutras 1:28

⁸¹ Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.1

⁸² Katha Upanishad 1. 2.15-17

⁸³ Mandukya Upanishad 1.8.12

mind along with all the pranas, know Him alone as the one Self. Dismiss other utterances. This [Om] is the bridge to immortality. Meditate on Om as the Self. May you be successful in crossing over to the farther shore of darkness.”⁸⁴

“Then Satyakama, son of Shibi, asked him [the Rishi Pippalada]: ‘Venerable Sir, what world does he who meditates on Om until the end of his life, win by That?’ To him, he said: ‘If he meditates on the Supreme Being [Parampurusha] with the Syllable Om, he becomes one with the Light, the Sun. He is led to the world of Brahman. He sees the Person that dwells in the body, Who is higher than the highest life....That the wise one attains, even by the mere sound Om as support, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.”⁸⁵

“The knower of the real nature of Brahman that is identical with the Pranava, should cross all the formidable streams [of samsara] with the ferryboat of the Pranava.”⁸⁶

“He who utters Om with the intention ‘I shall attain Brahman’ does verily attain Brahman.”⁸⁷

Alternating remembrance

The thorough practicality and good sense of dharma is one of its most striking features: *it works*. And it works very well. So it is meaningful that the upanishad tells us to remember Brahman, then remember our own past deeds, then remember Brahman, and then remember our own past deeds in a kind of alternating current. This is to keep us from falling into two serious errors: 1) being so focused on the “spiritual” that we do not pay attention to what is really going on with us, and 2) becoming so obsessed with ourselves that we utterly leave God out of the picture. Patanjali lists *swadhyaya*—introspective self-study—as an essential ingredient of yoga practice. Yet this self-study must be done in the greater context of divine consciousness: “In thy light shall we see light”⁸⁸ Only in the divine light can we see things as they really are.

So we should meditate on Brahman through Om, and outside of meditation we should look at our past, comparing our past deeds and our past states of mind with our present deeds and mental condition. This will reveal to us whether we are truly progressing or not. I knew a woman who sincerely believed that God was appearing to her in meditation and talking to her so sweetly, making her feel so holy and pure. Then she would come out of meditation and be unspeakably cruel to her daughter, both physically and mentally. In meditation she was an angel, but outside of meditation she was a devil. Wrong meditation gives us a wrong image of ourselves, but right meditation shows us the truth about both God and ourselves.

Of course we have to have a correct memory of our past. Many people are so blinded to the truth about themselves that when they learn to meditate they start saying: “My mind used to be calm, but it has gotten so restless,” or: “I used to be a nice person, but now I am just a wreck and falling apart.” The reality is that their mind was always restless, but not being introspective they did not realize it. They were also a complete ruin, mentally and spiritually, but they had no eyes with which to see it. Now they do, and they foolishly blame meditation. On the other hand, people who are practicing a wrong form of meditation (or a right form wrongly) do become increasingly restless and increasingly negative. I know of several kinds of meditation that really do bring about the mental and spiritual disintegration of those who

⁸⁴ Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6

⁸⁵ Prashna Upanishad 5:1,5,7

⁸⁶ Svetasvatara Upanishad 2:6

⁸⁷ Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1

⁸⁸ Psalms 36:9

practice them, and often the physical degeneration, as well. But those who meditate according to the teachings of the upanishads will have no problem.

The Inner Fire

Commentary on the Isha Upanishad

Because bodies are cremated in India, the final verse of the Isha Upanishad addressed to Agni (Fire) is recited when the crematory fire is lighted. But the upanishadic rishis had a far more profound intention when they intoned:

“O god Agni, lead us to felicity. Thou knowest all our deeds. Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin. To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!”⁸⁹

Agni

The most prevalently venerated natural force throughout the history of humanity is the sun. The next is fire, which was considered a divine gift. Fire is a mystery. Throughout my schooling, from grade school to university, I asked many teachers: WHAT is fire? Nobody gave me any answer, much less an accurate-seeming one.

A friend of mine once pointed out an interesting fact about fire. When people—especially young boys or girls—sit around an open fire, the subject of the supernatural in some form or other usually comes up. Ghost stories around the campfire are a staple of campers. How is this? My friend said that it was because fire stimulates awareness of the unseen levels of existence. Certainly this was the opinion in India where fire was considered a channel of communication between this world and the subtle worlds. Long before Christians were lighting candles in church to convey their prayers to Christ and the saints, in India people were reciting prayers in the presence of fire and making offerings into the fire, confident that the prayers and offerings would be transferred by the fire to their intended recipients. Consider in our own time how much attention and meaning is attached to the Olympic Flame—really only a shadow of the original Greek fire.

Everything has multiple layers to its existence, one of which is ideational. That is, everything that exists is a thought in the divine mind. Consequently everything is both meaningful and symbolic. To the yogis of India fire became a most significant symbol, the symbol of the will of the yogi and the transforming power of yoga itself. So much so, that yoga practice came to be called *tapasya*—the generation of heat. In the twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh wrote extensively on this subject, especially in relation to the yogic symbolism of the Vedic hymns.

Fire and meditation

In Vedic religion the fire rite, the Agnihotra or Havan, is the supreme ritual act. It is emblematic of the soul's progression to divinity, and its elements and actions can be studied to reveal many secrets of esoteric life and unfoldment. The sacred fire is kindled by the friction of two wooden sticks called aranis or drills. This is an important symbol, for it is considered that the fire is latent in the wood until the friction causes it to manifest. In the same way, enlightenment is latent in the yogi, awaiting the right conditions to be provided for its manifestation.

“As the form of fire when latent in its source is not seen and yet its seed is not destroyed, but may be seized again and again in its source by means of the drill [a pointed stick whirled

⁸⁹ Isha Upanishad 18

to produce fire for the Vedic sacrifices], so it is in both cases. The Self has to be seized in the body by means of the Syllable Om. By making one's body the lower friction stick and the Syllable Om the upper friction stick, by practicing the friction of meditation one may see the hidden God, as it were."⁹⁰ We are the lower arani, and Om is the upper arani. When they are brought together and made to interact with one another through the japa and meditation of Om, God is revealed to the meditator both within and without. The Hidden becomes manifest, and the Unseen becomes seen through Pranava Yoga. "Through Om the Lord is met face to face." wrote Shankara in his commentary on the Yoga Sutras.

"Having made oneself the lower arani, and the Pranava the upper arani and rubbing them together through the practice of meditation, see the Lord in His hidden reality."⁹¹

"Making the atman the lower arani and Om the upper arani, and practising the friction of meditation, one should apply himself to the best of his strength to the resonance of the sound of Omkara."⁹²

"By making his own inner sense [i.e., awareness] the lower arani and the Pranava the upper arani, the accomplished adept completely burns up and reduces to ashes his ignorance of the atman."⁹³

We see from these upanishadic statements that fire represents meditation, the effects of meditation, and Om, "the Word that is God."⁹⁴ With this in mind we can unravel the intentions of the rishis when they prayed: "O god Agni, lead us to felicity. Thou knowest all our deeds. Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin. To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!"

Lead us to felicity

Spiritual practice and the will to practice must go together. Knowing what to do, but having no interest to do it will get us nowhere. At the same time, wanting to succeed and not knowing how is equally useless. But put the two together for the necessary time, and all benefit will be ours. Agni represents the radiance of our self and of God as well as that which is produced by sadhana practice. These three fires will light our way to blessedness. But their combined effect will not just show us the way, it will lead us along the way, illumining our heart and minds with the requisite wisdom for spiritual attainment. It will also draw us along the path, but only in the degree that we are actively walking the path. This is indicated in the Song of Solomon when he prays: "Draw me, we will run after thee."⁹⁵ Both God and man must actively "seek" each other. It is said in India: "When someone chooses God you can know that God has chosen them." The liberating power we call Agni is the result of these two forces meeting and combining with one another.

Thou knowest all our deeds

After one of his classes on the Narada Bhakti Sutras, Swami Prabhavananda was asked how a person could avoid spiritual pride. His answer was remarkable: You cannot develop

⁹⁰ Svetasvatara Upanishad 1:13,14

⁹¹ Brahma Upanishad 4

⁹² DhyanaBindu Upanishad 22, 23

⁹³ Kaivalya Upanishad 11

⁹⁴ Bhagavad Gita 7:8

⁹⁵ Song of Solomon 1:4

spiritual pride if your spiritual practice is correct, for you see yourself correctly and can neither fall into pride or despair. This is certainly true. The light of tapasya reveals all about ourselves we need to know. Self-knowledge, even if fragmentary or dim at the beginning, is an immediate fruit of right meditation, and will in time develop into the full light of spiritual “day.” The Eastern Orthodox hymn to Saint Nicholas begins: “The truth of things revealed thee....” This is profoundly true. When we begin approaching the Real, the Truth becomes revealed, both the Truth of God and the truth of us.

Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin

Understanding the nature and consequences of our deeds, we will learn how to truly live as Krishna outlined in the Bhagavad Gita, especially the second chapter. At the closing of the third chapter, Arjuna asks: “Krishna, what is it that makes a man do evil, even against his own will; under compulsion, as it were?” To which Krishna replies:

“The rajoguna has two faces, rage and lust [*kama*: desire]: the ravenous, the deadly: recognize these: they are your enemies. Smoke hides fire, dust hides a mirror, the womb hides the embryo: by lust the Atman is hidden. Lust hides the Atman in its hungry flames, the wise man’s faithful foe. Intellect, senses and mind are fuel to its fire: thus it deludes the dweller in the body, bewildering his judgment. Therefore, Arjuna, you must first control your senses, then kill this evil thing which obstructs discriminative knowledge and realization of the Atman. The senses are said to be higher than the sense-objects. The mind is higher than the senses. The intelligent will is higher than the mind. What is higher than the intelligent will? The Atman Itself. You must know Him who is above the intelligent will. Get control of the mind through spiritual discrimination. Then destroy your elusive enemy, who wears the form of lust.”

Meditation and other forms of sadhana are that which protects us from the attraction of folly and ignorance. Wherefore Krishna asks: “The uncontrolled mind does not guess that the Atman is present: how can it meditate? Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?”⁹⁶

To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!

There are those who think that sadhana is medicine, a “have to” that they can sigh and grouch about and grudgingly engage in. They are wrong! Their very attitude will destroy any benefits the sadhana might bestow. They should forget about spiritual practice until they get enough good sense to rejoice in it and value it above all else. That does not mean it will not be difficult and even a struggle, sometimes painful, but it is their delusion that galls the wise, not the remedy for it. Meditation should be a kind of “deity” for us by the grace of which we can worship the Divine and our own divine self. The means of meditation should also be worshipped, and so the upanishads say:

“The Syllable Om is to be worshipped as consisting of Brahman, Who is Satchidananda....Because it delivers [saves], Om is called the Deliverer [Saving One: Taraka]. It should be known as the saving [delivering] Brahman which should be worshipped—mark this well.”⁹⁷

“That which is Om is the indestructible, the supreme Brahman. That alone should be

⁹⁶ Bhagavad Gita 2:66

⁹⁷ Rama Uttara Tapiniya Upanishad

worshipped....It is called Taraka because it enables one to cross this mundane existence [samsara]. Know that Taraka [Om] alone is Brahman and It alone should be worshipped....He who knows this becomes immortal.”⁹⁸

“Omkara is the holiest of holy things....it is holy and full of sanctifying things. One shall worship Omkara,” says the Vayu Purana.

Shankara said it even more pointedly in his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: “Just as the image of Vishnu or any other god is regarded as identical with that god (for purposes of worship), so is Om to be treated as Brahman.” And in his commentary on the Chandogya Upanishad: “The syllable Om is the inmost essence of all essences. It is supreme because of Its being the symbol of the Supreme Self. It is competent to be worshipped as the Supreme Self. It is competent to take the place of the Supreme Self since It is to be worshipped like the Supreme Self....The Vedic rites are meant for the worship of the very Om because It is a symbol of the Supreme Self. The worship of That [Om] is surely the worship of the supreme Self.”

“To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!”

⁹⁸ Tarasara Upanishad